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ABSTRACT

This brief summary is based on analysis of the Annual Reports to Congress on implementation of the Education for the Handicapped Act (now Individuals with Disabilities Education Act) by the Office of Special Education Programs. Narratives and graphs demonstrate the continuing increase in numbers of special education students, the leveling out of numbers of special education teachers employed and numbers of students per teacher, and the increasing numbers of special education teachers needed (based on number of positions school systems are unable to fill with qualified personnel). (DB)

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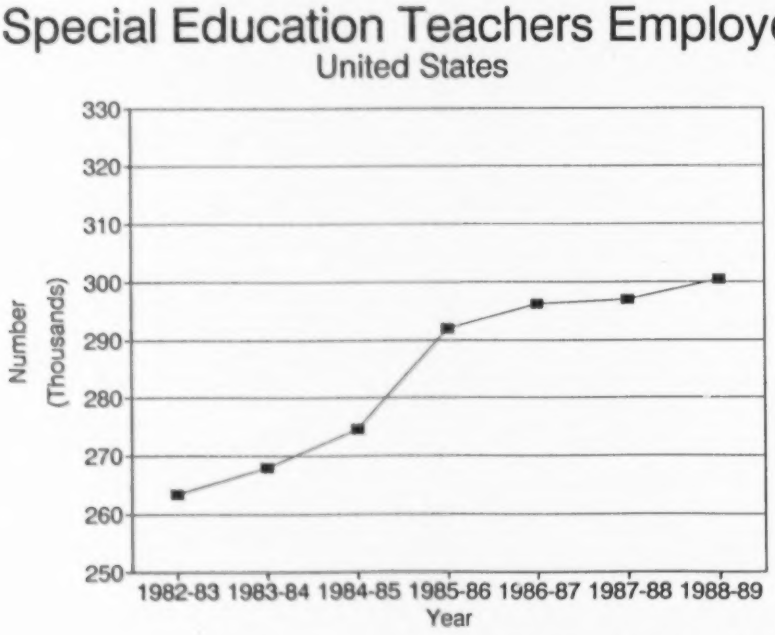
The Increasing Need for Special Education Teachers: Evidence from the Annual Reports to Congress

The size of the work force of teachers employed in providing special education is large and has grown every year since the passage of P.L. 94-142, the Education for the Handicapped Act (now Individuals with Disabilities Education Act). Over 300,000 special education teachers were employed nationally in school year 1988-89 an almost 70% increase over the approximately 180,000 special education teachers who were employed ten years earlier in school year 1976-77.

There are several indications that the need for the special education teachers will continue to grow. For one thing, the number of students in special education continues to increase. There were 3.7 million students receiving special education in 1976-77; by 1989-90 that number increased to nearly 4.7 million. Furthermore, the rate of increase has been greater in the past five years than it was previously. In 1984-85, the number of students in special



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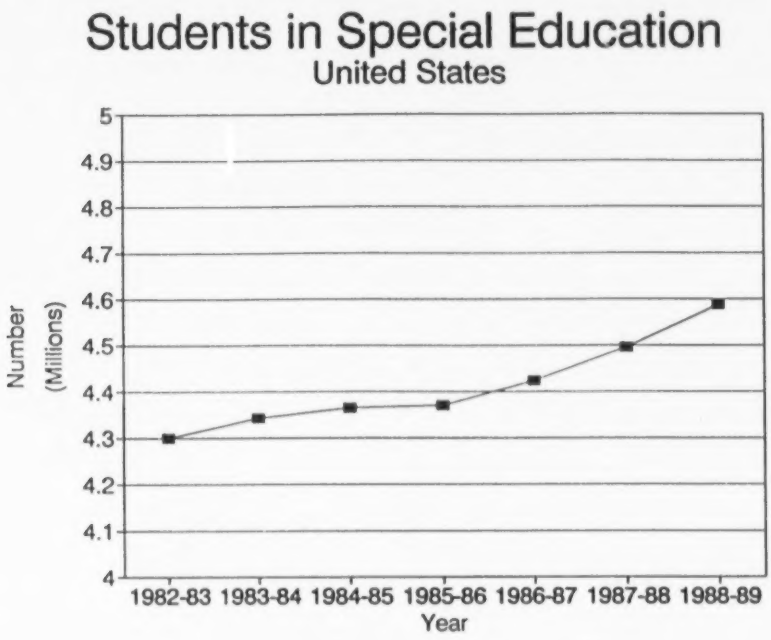
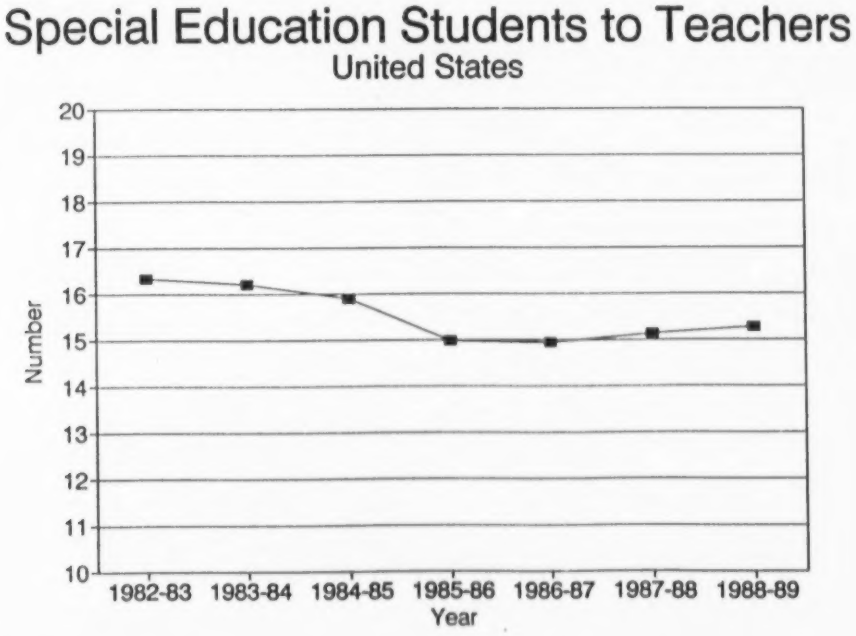
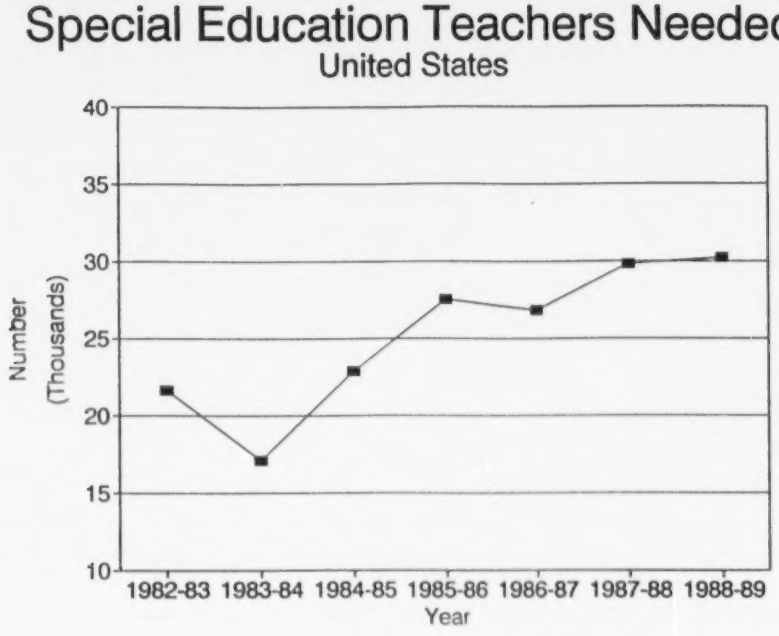
education increased only one half of one percent over the previous year. The increase for 1988-89 and 1989-90 was 2.1 and 2.2 percent, respectively, over the previous school year. Most of the increase is due to an increase in the number of students with learning disabilities who make up nearly 50 percent of all students receiving special education. The national ratio of the number of students in special education to the number of teachers employed has been decreasing slightly. The ratio was roughly 16 to 1 in 1982-83; it has been about 15 to 1 since 1985-86.







A second indicator of the growing need for special education teachers is the data on the positions that school systems are unable to fill with qualified personnel. For school year 1988-89, states reported needing 30,000 more special education teachers than they were able to find. This means there were 30,000 positions that were left vacant or were filled by teachers who were not appropriately certified for their assignment. Nationally, for every ten special education teachers employed, there was a need for one more. This was nearly identical to the ratio for the previous year and slightly better (i.e., fewer teachers needed) than the previous years.

States differ in the extent of their need for special education teachers, although all states report needing more than they are able to find. During the school year 1989-90, for example, the state of Washington needed one additional special education teacher for every 42 in its work force while Nevada reflected the national average by reporting a need of about one teacher for every eleven employed. Some states reported tremendous needs. Missouri and Florida, for example, needed an additional special education teacher for every four that were employed.

While there is much interest in knowing what kind of special education teachers are needed, it is difficult to present a national answer to this question. States differ in the categories they use to certify teachers for special education. Because of these differences, it is difficult to meaningfully aggregate data across states.

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About these data: The data discussed here are from the Office of Special Education Programs in the U.S. Department of Education. They are reported annually by each state to the federal government. The validity of the national figures depends entirely on the accuracy of the individual state reports. The accuracy of the individual state reports may vary from state-to-state but the extent of the error in the individual state reports is unknown. The data on teachers employed are reported in full time equivalents (FTEs), not actual number of employees. For example, two half-time teachers were counted as 1 FTE. The data on teachers needed was first collected in its current form for 1982-83. The early years should be interpreted with caution in that the early years of a data collection often produce somewhat less accurate information than the later years.

Special Education Teachers

Year	Employed	Needed
1988-89	300,417	30,181
1987-88	297,034	29,774
1986-87	296,196	26,798
1985-86	291,954	27,474
1984-85	274,519	22,852
1983-84	267,943	17,103
1982-83	263,374	21,638
1981-82	251,361	
1980-81	247,404	data not
1978-79	220,337	available
1977-78	208,071	
1976-77	191,305	

Source: Recent Annual Reports to Congress, U. S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs. Washington, D. C.

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